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## **Opinion: Freeway talks a step in right direction**

by Southeast Valley editorial board - Aug. 9, 2010 02:08 PM

My Turn

People are cheering the possibility that the South Mountain Freeway will be built on tribal land, and that's understandable.

Moving the proposed freeway from Ahwatukee to the Gila River Reservation would spare homes, a church and destruction of parts of the South Mountain Preserve.

But people should not cheer too loudly. This is only an incremental step.

The freeway has been planned on Pecos Road for years, whereas discussions with the Gila River Indian Community about building the eight-lane, \$1.9 billion piece of infrastructure started late last year.

Even if GRIC were to approve building the freeway on tribal land, negotiations could be delayed if several private land owners are involved. And the tribe may have to rescind a resolution against building the freeway on its land before plans move forward.

This could take time, but it's time worth taking.

It has been said repeatedly in this space that the South Mountain Freeway must be built to relieve traffic on Interstate 10. It would connect Chandler and Laveen, give motorists the option to bypass downtown Phoenix and complete the Loop 202.

A route slightly south of Pecos Road would be preferable because it would lessen impact on South Mountain Park and existing neighborhoods in Ahwatukee and west Phoenix. That two potential routes have been found on flat, undeveloped tribal land, just south of the Pecos route, is welcome news.

The state and Valley motorists are eager to build the long-awaited freeway. They may see no reason for GRIC to refuse construction of the freeway on tribal land. But it would behoove interested parties to be respectful and mindful of tribal members' concerns as they move forward.

No one needs to remind GRIC that a freeway would promote economic development and provide access to their casinos. Tribal leaders acknowledged those benefits in a meeting with *The Republic* editorial board earlier this year.

Like Valley residents, GRIC members are concerned with the traffic and air pollution that a freeway brings, not to mention loss of land.

The tribe has not forgotten about the interchanges and frontage roads the state promised when it built Interstate 10 decades ago - an interstate that cut the reservation in half.

Still, GRIC allowed Arizona Department of Transportation engineers to study its land for possible routes of the South Mountain Freeway.

The state must build on that relationship to make a lucrative deal with GRIC, which is in the position to expect nothing less. That deal must be pursued diligently and in good faith. Only then can the cheers begin.